

What Woodward's Book "Rage" Tells us about U.S.-Korea Relations

blog.keia.org/2020/09/woodwards-book-rage-tells-us-u-s-korea-relations/

September 24, 2020



By Mark Tokola

At least in U.S. media outlets, the main Korea story to emerge from Bob Woodward's new book "Rage" is the correspondence between President Trump and Kim Jong-un, which is characterized as faintly ridiculous. I'll set aside the question of whether Kim Jong-un's letters read better in Korean, and particularly within North Korean rhetorical tradition. The language of the letters may not be that extraordinary. Perhaps odder are President Trump's efforts to mirror the floridness of the language.

For President Trump to be impressed by being called "Excellency" also shows a remarkable lack of experience with reading diplomatic correspondence, in which it is a commonplace title not only for heads of government but for all ambassadors. The more serious problem is that the letters have been made public. Exposing letters between heads of governments may close off one form of confidential communication at a time when we need all the channels of communication we can get.

You get the impression, reading the whole book, that Woodward thought it a scoop to reveal how close the U.S. Government was to believing that we were to going to war with North Korea toward the end of 2017. More than once, he shows Secretary of Defense Mattis going to the National Cathedral to meditate on the tragedy such a conflict would become.

It seems clear from Woodward's interviews that the issue was not whether U.S. officials were considering attacking North Korea, but their deep concern that North Korea might attack the United States. That did not seem fanciful at the time even from publicly available sources. North Korea was producing videos of what an attack on New York or Washington, DC would look like. North Korean media released a photo of Kim Jong-un studying a map showing missile tracks from North Korea leading into the United States. North Korea not only asserted that it had the means of attacking the United States, it was open about its intent to do so if conditions warranted. The general lack of current interest in that part of "Rage," shows that it seems like a problem of the past—at least for now.

A third story in “Rage” is President Trump’s statements that he would withdraw U.S. forces from South Korea if he had the opportunity to do so. That’s not a shocker, he’s said it publicly. What the book makes clear however is that he says this privately as well as publicly. It is therefore not just a negotiating stance to get South Korea to pay more in the current burden sharing negotiations. He means it. He would withdraw U.S. troops if he could. All that has been in the way of his doing so is the consensus of the foreign policy and defense establishments, overwhelming Congressional sentiment, and strong American public support for the U.S.-ROK alliance.

Looking back over Donald Trump’s long life in the public eye, he’s changed his views on controversial issues such as gun control, abortion, and military interventions abroad. There are however two issues on which he has had rock-solid consistency. One is that trade with foreign countries is self-evidently unfair unless the United States is running a merchandise trade surplus. The other is that the United States should not defend any foreign country unless it pays at least full cost. He wrote an open letter to the New York Times on September 2, 1987, saying that Saudi Arabia and Japan should pay the United States “for the defense of their freedom.” We can see from Woodward’s two books on the Trump Administration that if he wins a second term, we can expect him to push his core beliefs on trade and pay-as-you-go alliance relationships all the more vigorously.

Mark Tokola is the Vice President of the Korea Economic Institute of America. The views expressed here are his own.

Image from the Republic of Korea’s photostream on flickr Creative Commons.

© 2007-2011 Korea Economic Institute | All Rights Reserved.

Web Design by Blue Water Media